

Dust to Dust

Rictus was waiting at the top of the stairs. His smile was sweet. His words were not.

"You're a murderer now, my little man," he said. "Do you like the feel of Marr's blood on your hands?"

"He didn't kill her," Mrs. Griffin said. "She was never alive. None of you are."

"What are we then?" Rictus asked.

"Illusions," Harvey replied, ushering Mrs. Griffin and her cat past Rictus to the front door. "It's all illusions."

Rictus followed them, giggling insanely.

"What's so funny?" Harvey said, opening the door to let Mrs. Griffin out into the sun.

"You are!" Rictus replied. "You think you know everything, but you don't know Mr. Hood."

"I will in a little while," said Harvey. "Go and get warm," he told Mrs. Griffin. "I'll be back."

"Be careful, child," she said.

"I will," he told her, then closed the door.

"You're a strange one," Rictus said, his smile failing a little. His face, when his teeth no longer dazzled, was like a mask made of dough. Two thumb-holes for eyes, and a blob for a nose.

"I could suck out your brains through your ears," he said, all the music gone from his voice.

"Maybe you could," said Harvey. "But you're not going to."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've got an appointment with your master."

He started toward the bottom of the stairs, but before he reached it a dark figure flitted in front of him. It was Jive, and he was carrying a plate of apple pie and ice cream.

"It's a long climb," he said. "Put something in your stomach first."

Harvey looked down at the plate. The pie was golden brown and dusted with sugar, the ice cream melting in a sweet, white pool! It Certainly looked tempting.

"Go on," said Jive. "You deserve a treat."

"No thanks," Harvey told him.

"Why not?" Jive wanted to know, turning full circle on his heel. "It's lighter than I am."

"But I know what it's made of," Harvey said.

"Apples and cinnamon and-"

"No," said Harvey. "I know what it's really made of."

He looked back at the pie, and for a moment it seemed he glimpsed the truth of the thing: the gray dust and ashes from which this illusion was made.

"You think it's poisoned?" Jive said. "Is that it?"

"Maybe," Harvey replied, still staring at the pie.

"Well, it's not!" Jive said. "And I'll prove it!" Harvey heard Rictus make a warning sound behind him, but Jive didn't catch it. He plunged his fingers into the pie and ice cream and delivered them to his mouth in one swift motion.

As he closed his mouth Rictus said: "Don't swallow it!"

Again, too late. The food went down in one gulp. An instant later, Jive dropped the plate and began to slam his fists against his stomach, as if to

force the food up again. But instead of half-chewed pie, a cloud of dust issued from between his teeth. Then another; then another. Half-blinded, Jive snatched at Harvey's throat. "What...have...you...done?" he coughed.

Harvey had no difficulty shaking himself free. "It's all dust," he said. "Dirt and dust and ashes! All the food! All the presents! Everything!" "Help me!" Jive said, clawing at his mouth. "Somebody help me!" "There's no help for you now!" came a solemn voice, Harvey looked around. It was Rictus who had spoken, and he was retreating across the hallway, his hands clamped to his face. He stared at Jive between his fingers, his teeth chattering as he voiced the horrid truth. "You shouldn't have eaten that pie," he said. "It's reminding your belly of what you're made of." "What's that?" Jive said.

"What the boy says," Rictus replied. "Dirt and ashes!" Jive threw back his head, howling Noooo! at this, but even as he opened his mouth to deny it the truth came pouring forth: dry streams of dust that ran from his gullet and flowed over his angers. It was like a fatal message being passed from one part of his body to another. Touched by the dust his fingers began to crumble in their turn, and as they dropped, the same whisper of decay spread to his thighs and knees and feet. He started to drop to the ground, but with a final pirouette, swung himself around and grabbed hold of the banister. "Save me!" he yelled up the stairs. "Mr. Hood, can you hear me? Please! Please, save me!"

His legs crumbled beneath him now, but he refused to give up. He started to haul himself up the stairs, still yelling for Mr. Hood to heal him: There was no reply from the heights of the House, however, nor any sound now from Rictus. There were only Jive's pleas and wheezings, and the hiss of dust as it ran away down the stairs from the emptying sack of his body. "What's going on?" Wendell said, appearing from the kitchen with ketchup smeared around his mouth.

He stared at the cloud of dust that hung around the stairs, unable to see the creature at its heart. Harvey was closer to the cloud, however, and so was witness to Jive's last, terrible moments. The dying creature reached up with an almost fingerless hand, still hoping-even as its life drifted away-that its creator would come to save it. Then it sank down upon the stairs, and its last pitiful fragments crumbled.

"Somebody been beating the carpets?" Wendell said, as Jive's dust settled.

"Two down," Harvey murmured to himself.

"What did you say?" Wendell wanted to know.

Before he replied, Harvey glanced around the hallway, looking for Rictus. But Hood's third servant had disappeared. "It doesn't matter," Harvey said. "Are you done eating?"

"Yeah."

"Was the food good?"

Wendell grinned. "Yeah."

Harvey shook his head. "What does that mean?" Wendell asked.

Harvey was on the verge of saying: It means you can't help me; it means I have to go up and face Mr. Hood on my own. But what was the use? The House had claimed Wendell entirely. He'd be more of a hindrance than a help in the battle ahead. So instead he said: "Mrs. Griffin's outside."

"So we found her?"

"We found her."

"I'll go say hi," Wendell said with a cheery smile.

"Good idea."

Wendell had his hand on the door when he turned and said: "Where will you be?"

But Harvey didn't answer. He'd already climbed past the heap of dust that marked Jive's demise, and was nearing the top of the first flight, on his way to meet the power that lay waiting in the darkness of the attic.

XX

The Thieves Meet

Glimpsing the dusty truth masquerading as pie and ice cream was one thing, but scratching the veneer of deceptions that the House had polished to such perfection was quite another. As Harvey climbed the stairs he kept hoping he'd find some little detail in the walls or the carpets that would allow him to get his mind's fingers beneath the lid of this illusion and lift it up to see what charmless thing lay inside. If Marr had been made of stale mud and spittle, and Jive of dust, what was the House itself made of? But it knew its business too well. However hard Harvey stared, he could not pierce its lies. It delighted his senses with warmth and color and the scents of summer; it cooed softly in his ear and played its gentle airs against his face.

Even when he reached the dark landing at the top of the final flight, the House continued to pretend that this was just another innocent game of hide-and-seek, like the countless games it had seen played in its shadow.

There were five doors ahead of him, everyone of them ajar a few inches, as if to say: There are no secrets here, not from a boy who wants the truth. Come look! Come see! If you dare.

He dared, but not in the way the House had planned. After spending a few moments examining the doors, he ignored all of them, and instead went back down a flight, chose a strong chair from one of the bedrooms, brought it back upstairs, climbed onto it and pushed open the trapdoor that let onto the attic. It was hard work hauling himself up, but he knew, when he'd finished and lay panting on the attic floor, that his pursuit of Hood was almost at an end. The Vampire King was near. Who else but a master of illusions would live in a place so bereft of them? The attic was all the House was not: filthy, murky and cobwebbed.

"Where are you?" he said. It was no use thinking he could surprise the enemy. Hood had watched his ascent from the first stair. "Come out," he yelled, "I want to see what a thief looks like."

There was no reply at first, but then—from somewhere at the other end of the attic—Harvey heard a low, guttural growl. Not waiting for his eyes to become fully accustomed to the gloom he started toward the utterance, the boards creaking beneath his feet as he went.

Twice he stopped to look up, because a noise somewhere in the darkness overhead caught his attention. Was it a trapped bird, panicking as it flew blindly back and forth? Or roaches, perhaps, massed on the beams above him? He told himself to put such imaginings out of his head and concentrate on finding Hood. There were enough real reasons to be fearful here without inventing more. Unlike the area around the trapdoor, this end of the attic served as some kind of storeroom, and his enemy was surely lurking in the maze of rotting pictures and mildewed furniture. In fact, wasn't that a fluttering

motion he saw now out of the corner of his eye?

"Hood?" he said, squinting to try and make better sense of the shape in the shadows. "What are you doing hiding up here?"

He took another step forward, and as he did so he realized his error. This wasn't the mysterious Mr. Hood. He knew this shape, mangled though it was: the half-rotted wings; the tiny black eyes; the teeth, the endless teeth.

It was Carna!

The creature half rose from its squalid nest, snapping at Harvey as it did so. He made a stumbling retreat, and might have been seized after three steps had Carna not been so hobbled by its wounds and slowed by the chaos of its surroundings.

It struck out at the piles of detritus to the left and right of it, scattering chairs and overturning boxes; then hauled itself in pained pursuit of its prey. Harvey kept his eyes fixed upon the beast as he backed away, his mind buzzing with questions. Where was Hood? That was the main mystery. Mrs. Griffin had been certain he was up here somewhere, but Harvey had now wandered the attic from end to end, and its only occupant was the creature driving him back toward the exit.

He chanced several glances into the shadows as he retreated in case he'd missed some figure hiding there. It was not a human form his eyes alighted upon, however; it was a globe the size of a tennis ball, glowing as though filled with starlight. It appeared like a bubble from the boards and rose toward the roof. Momentarily forgetting his jeopardy, Harvey watched it as it ascended, joined by another, then a third and a fourth.

Astonished by the sight, he took too little care where he was walking. He stumbled, fell, and ended up sprawled on the hard boards, staring up at the roof through a red haze of pain.

And there above him was Hood, in all his glory.

His face was spread over the entire roof, his features horribly distorted.

His eyes were dark pits gouged into the timbers; his nose was flared and flattened grotesquely, like the nose of an enormous bat; his mouth was a lipless slit that was surely ten feet wide, from which issued a voice that was like the creaking of doors and the howling of chimneys and the rattling of windows.

"Child!" he said. "You have brought pain into my paradise. Shame on you!"

"What pain?" Harvey shouted back. He was shuddering to his marrow, but he knew this was no time to show his fear. He would deal in illusion, the way the enemy did; pretending courage even if he didn't feel it. "I came to get what was mine, that's all," he said.

Hood sucked one of the gleaming spheres into his mouth. Its light went out instantly.

"Marr is dead," he said. "Jive is dead. Gone to muck and dust because of you!"

"They were never alive," Harvey said.

"Did you not hear their sobs and pleas?" Hood demanded, the knots in his brow tightening. "Did you not pity them?"

"No," Harvey said.

"Then I will not pity you," came the rasping reply. "I will watch my poor Carna devour you from sole to scalp, and take pleasure in it."

Harvey glanced in Carna's direction. The beast had stopped advancing, but was poised to strike, its dripping jaws inches from Harvey's feet. Now that the beast was still, he could clearly see how badly wounded it was, its body as ragged as a moldy rug, its huge head drooping as though every breath was a burden.

As Harvey stared at it he remembered something Mrs. Griffin had told him:

"I would welcome Death now," she'd said, "like a friend I'd driven from my door."

Maybe it wasn't a journey to the stars that was awaiting Carna; maybe it was simply a return to the nothingness from which Hood had conjured it. But the creature wanted that gift nevertheless. It was weary and wounded, kept alive not by any will of its own but because Hood demanded its service.

"Such a pity..." the voice in the roof murmured.

"What is?" Harvey said, looking back at Hood, who had two more of the globes at his lips. "To lose you this way," he went on. "Can't I persuade you to think again? After all, I've done you no harm.

Why not come back and live here peacefully?"

"You stole thirty years of time with my mom and dad from me!" Harvey said.

"If I stay here you'll steal a lot more."

"I only took the days you didn't want," Hood protested. "The rainy days.

The gray days. The days you wished away. Where's the crime in that?"

"I didn't know what I was losing," Harvey protested.

"Ah," said Hood softly, "but isn't that always the way of it? Things slip from your fingers and when they're gone you regret it. But gone is gone, Harvey Swick!"

"No!" Harvey said. "What you stole I can steal back."

At this, a gleam ignited in the twin pits of Hood's eyes.

"You burn bright, Harvey Swick!" he said. "I've never known a soul that burned as bright as yours." He frowned as if studying the boy below. "Now I understand," he said.

"Understand what?"

"Why it is you came back."

Harvey began to say: I came for what you took, but Hood was correcting him before he'd uttered two words.

"You came because you knew you'd find a home here," Hood said. "We're both thieves, Harvey Swick. I take time. You take lives. But in the end we're the same: both Thieves of Always."

Repulsive as it was to think of himself in any way similar to this monster, there was some corner of Harvey that feared this was true. The thought silenced him.

"Perhaps we needn't be enemies," Hood said. "Perhaps I should take you under my wing. My west wing." He laughed mirthlessly at his own joke: "I can nurture you. Help you better understand the Dark Paths."

"So I'll end up feeding on children, like you?" Harvey said. "No hanks"

"I think you'd like it, Harvey Swick," Hood said. "You've got a streak of the vampire in you already."

There was no denying this. The very word vampire reminded him of his Halloween flight; of soaring against a harvest moon with his eyes burning red and his teeth sharp as razors.

"I see you remember," Hood said, catching the flicker of pleasure on Harvey's face.

Harvey instantly put a scowl in its place. "I don't want to stay here," he said. "I just want to get what's mine and leave."

Hood sighed. "So sad," he said. "So very sad. But if you will have what's yours, have death. Carnal" The beast raised its pitiful head.

"Devour the boy!"

Before the wretched beast could shift itself Harvey scrambled to his feet.

In the race to the trapdoor he knew he had little chance of outrunning Carna; but was there perhaps another way of laying the beast low? If he was a Thief of Always, as Hood had said, perhaps it was time to prove it. Not with dust, nor with stolen conjurings, but with the power in his own bones.

Carna took a threatening step toward him, but instead of retreating Harvey extended his hand in the creature's direction, as if to pat its decaying head.

It hesitated, its expression mellowing into doubt.

"Devour him..." the Vampire King growled.

The beast lowered its head, in expectation of punishment from above. But it was Harvey who laid his hand upon it; a gentle touch that sent a shudder through its body. It raised its snout to press itself against Harvey's palm, and as it did so, let out a long, low moan.

There was neither pain in the sound nor complaint. In fact it was almost a moan of gratitude, that for once it not be met with blows or with howls of horror. It turned its eyes up to Harvey's face, and a shudder of pleasure passed through its body. It seemed to know that the motion would prove fatal, because the instant after, it retreated from its comforter and as it did so its shudders multiplied, and its body suddenly flew into a thousand pieces.

Its teeth, which had seemed so fearsome moments before, rolled away into the darkness; its massive skull shattered; its spine collapsed. In a matter of seconds it was no more than a heap of bone shards, so dry and so aged even the most desperate dog would have passed them by.

Harvey glanced up at the face in the roof. Hood's expression was one of utter perplexity. His mouth was agape, his eyes staring from their pits.

Harvey didn't wait for him to break his silence. He simply turned his back on Carna's remains and hurried toward the trapdoor, half expecting the creature in the roof to slam it shut. There was no response from Hood, however, until Harvey was lowering himself down onto the chair on the landing. Only then, as Harvey took one last look up at the attic, did Hood speak.

"Oh my little thief..." he murmured. "What shall me do with you now?"

XXI

Tricks and Temptations

"You've done well," said the smiling face awaiting him at the top of the stairs.

"I wondered where you'd gone to," Harvey said to Rictus.

"Always ready to serve," came the unctuous reply.

"Really?" said Harvey, stepping down off the chair and approaching the creature.

"Of course," said Rictus. "Always."

Now that he was closer to the man, Harvey saw the cracks in his veneer. He was plastering on a smile, and smothering his words in butter and honey, but it was the sour smell of fear that oozed from his sickly skin.

"You're afraid of me, aren't you?" Harvey said.

"No, no," Rictus insisted, "I'm respectful, that's all. Mr. Hood thinks you're a bright boy. He's instructed me to offer whatever you want to make you stay." He spread his arms. "The sky's the limit."

"You know what I want."

"Anything but the years, thief. You can't have those. You won't even need them if you stay and become Mr. Hood's apprentice. You'll live forever, just like him." He dabbed at the sweat beads on his upper lip with a yellowed handkerchief. "Think about it," he said. "You might be able to kill the likes of Carna...or me...but you'll never hurt Hood. He's too old; too wise; too dead."

"If I stayed..." Harvey said.

Rictus's grin spread. "Yes?" he purred.

"Would the children in the lake go free?"

"Why bother about them?"

"Because one of them was my friend," Harvey reminded him.

"You're thinking of little Lulu, aren't you?" Rictus said. "Well, let me

tell you, she's very happy down there. They all are."

"No they're not!" Harvey raged. "The lake's foul and you know it." He took a step toward Rictus, who retreated as if in fear of his life, which perhaps he was. "How would you like it?" Harvey said, stabbing his finger in Rictus's direction. "Living in the cold and the dark?"

"You're right," said Rictus, raising his hands in surrender. "Whatever you say."

"I say set them free now!" Harvey replied. "And if you won't, then I will!"

He pushed Rictus aside and started down the stairs two at a time. He didn't have a clue what he was going to do when he got down to the lake, fish were fish, after all, even if they'd once been children; if he tried to take them out of the lake they'd surely drown in the air-but he was determined to somehow save them from Hood.

Rictus came after him down the flight, chattering like a clockwork salesman.

"What do you want?" he said. "Just imagine it and it's yours! How about your own motorcycle?" As he spoke something gleamed on the landing below, and the sleekest motorcycle human eyes had ever seen rolled into view. "It's yours, m'boy!" Rictus said.

"No thanks," Harvey said.

"I don't blame you!" Rictus said, kicking the motorcycle over as he sailed past it. "How about books? Do you like books?"

Before Harvey could reply the wall in front of him lifted like a great brick curtain, revealing shelf upon shelf of leather-bound volumes.

"The masterpieces of the world!" Rictus said. "From Aristotle to Zola! No?"

"No!" said Harvey, hurrying on.

"There's got to be something you want," Rictus said.

They were heading toward the final flight of stairs now, and Rictus knew he didn't have very long before his prey was out in the open air.

"You like dogs?" Rictus said, as a litter of yapping pups scampered up the stairs. "Pick one! Hell, have 'em all!"

Harvey was tempted, but he stepped over them and on.

"Something more exotic, maybe?" Rictus said, as a flock of brilliantly feathered parrots descended from the ceiling. Harvey waved them away.

"Too noisy, huh?" said Rictus. "You want something quiet and powerful. Tigers! That's what you want! Tigers!"

No sooner said than they padded into view in the hallway below; two white tigers, with eyes like polished gold.

"Nowhere to keep 'em!" Harvey said.

"That's practical!" Rictus conceded. "I like a practical kid."

As the tigers bounded off, the telephone on the table beside the kitchen door began to ring. Rictus was down the flight in two springs, and at the table in another two.

"Listen to this!" he said. "It's the President. He wants to give you a medal!"

"No he doesn't," Harvey said, tiring of this rigamarole now. He was at the bottom of the stairs and crossing to the front door.

"You're right," said Rictus, ear to the phone again. "He wants to give you an oil field, in Alaska!" Harvey kept walking. "No, no, I got that wrong! He wants to give you Alaska!"

"Too cold."

"He says: How about Florida?"

"Too hot."

"Boy! You're a difficult guy to please, Harvey Swick!"
Harvey ignored him, and turned the handle of the front door. Rictus slammed down the phone and raced toward him.
"Wait up!" he hollered, "wait up! I'm not done yet."
"You've got nothing I want," Harvey said, hauling open the front door.
"They're all fakes."
"What if they are?" said Rictus, suddenly hushed. "So's the sun out there. You can still enjoy it. And let me tell you, it takes a lot of magic to conjure up all these shams and hoaxes. Mr. Hood's really sweating to find you something you like."
Ignoring him, Harvey stepped out onto the porch. Mrs. Griffin was standing on the lawn, with Stew-Cat in her arms, squinting up at the House. She smiled when she saw Harvey emerge.
"I heard such noises," she said. "What's been going on in there?"
"I'll tell you later," said Harvey. "Where's Wendell?"
"He wandered off," she said.
Harvey cupped his hands around his mouth, and yelled: "Wendell! Wendell!"
His voice came back to him from the face of the House. But there was no reply from Wendell.
"It's a warm afternoon," said Rictus, idling on the porch. "Maybe he went...swimming."
"Oh no," Harvey murmured. "No. Not Wendell. Please, not Wendell..."
Rictus shrugged. "He was a goofy little kid, anyhow," he said. "He'll probably look better as a fish!"
"No!" Harvey yelled up at the House. "This isn't fair! You can't do this! You can't!"
Tears started to cloud his eyes. He wiped them away with his fists. They were both useless, fists and tears. He couldn't soften Hood's heart with weeping, and he couldn't bring down the House with blows. He had no weapon against the enemy but his wits, and his wits were about at an end.

XXII

Appetite

Oh, to be a vampire again, Harvey thought. To have claws and fangs and a hunger for blood upon him, like the hunger he'd had that distant Halloween; the hunger he'd turned from in disgust. He wouldn't turn from it now. Oh no. He'd let it swell the beast in him, so he could fly in Hood's face with his hatred razor-sharp.
But he wasn't a beast, he was a boy. It was the Vampire King who had the power, not him.
And then, as he stared up at the House, he remembered something that Rictus had told him at the door: "It takes a lot of magic to conjure up these shams and hoaxes," he'd said. "Mr. Hood's really sweating to find you something you like"
Maybe I don't need fangs to suck him dry, Harvey thought; maybe all I need is wishes.
"I want to talk to Hood," he told Rictus.
"Why?"
"Well...maybe there are some things I'd like. Only I want to tell him about them personally."
"He's listening," Rictus said, glancing back toward the House.

Harvey scanned the windows, and the eaves, and the porch, but there was no sign of any presence. "I don't see him," he said.

"Yes you do," Rictus replied.

"Is he in the House?" Harvey asked, staring through the open door.

"Haven't you guessed yet?" Rictus replied. "He is the House."

As he spoke a cloud moved over the sun. The roof and walls darkened, and the entire House seemed to swell like a monstrous fungus. It was alive! From the eaves to the foundations, alive!

"Go on!" Rictus said. "Speak to him. He's listening."

Harvey took a step toward the House. "Can you hear me?" he said.

The front door swung a little wider, and a sighing breath from the top of the stairs blew a cloud of Jive's dust out onto the porch.

"He can hear you," said Rictus.

"If I stay-" Harvey began.

"Yesss...?" said the House, making the word from creaks and rattles.

"-you'll give me anything I want?"

"For a bright boy like you..." came the reply, "...anything."

"You promise? On your magic?"

"I promise. I promise. Just say the word..."

"Well, for a start-"

"Yesss?"

"I lost my ark."

"Then you must have another, my lodestar," the Hood-House said. "Bigger. Better." And a board of the porch folded back as an ark three times the size of the first one rose into view.

"I don't want lead animals," Harvey said as he walked toward the steps.

"What then?" said Hood. "Silver? Gold?"

"Flesh and blood," Harvey replied. "Perfect little animals."

"I like a challenge," Hood said, and as he spoke a tinny din of bellows and roars rose from the ark, and the little windows were flung open and the doors flung wide and half a hundred animals appeared, all perfect miniatures: elephants, giraffes, hyenas, aardvarks, doves.

"Satisfied?" said Hood.

Harvey shrugged. "It's okay, I suppose," he said.

"Okay?" said Hood. "It's a little miracle."

"So make me another."

"Another ark?"

"Another miracle!"

"What would you like?"

Harvey turned his back on the Hood-House and surveyed the lawn. The sight of Mrs. Griffin, watching with puzzlement, inspired the next request. "I want flowers," he said. "Everywhere! And I don't want two alike."

"What for?" asked the Hood-House.

"You said I could have whatever I wanted," Harvey replied. "You didn't say I had to give you reasons. If I have to do that all the fun goes out of it."

"Oh, I wouldn't want that," the Hood-House said. "You must have fun, at all costs."

"So give me the flowers," Harvey insisted.

The lawn began to tremble as though a minor earthquake were underway, and the next moment countless shoots pressed up between the blades of grass. Mrs. Griffin began to laugh with delight.

"Look at them!" she said. "Just look!"

It was quite a show; tens of thousands of flowers bursting into blossom at the same time. Harvey could have named a few of them if he'd been quizzed: tulips, daffodils, roses. But most of them were new to him: species that only bloomed at night on the High Himalayas, or on the windswept plateaus of Tierra

del Fuego; flowers with blooms as big as his head, or as small as his thumbnail; blooms that stank like bad meat, or smelled like a breeze from Heaven itself. Even though he knew it was all an illusion, he was impressed, and said so.

"Looks good," he told the Hood-House.

"Satisfied?" it wanted to know.

Was its voice a little weaker than it had been earlier? Harvey wondered.

He suspected it was. He showed no sign of that suspicion, however. He simply said: "We're getting there..."

"Getting where?" said the Hood-House.

"Well," said Harvey, "I guess we'll know when we arrive."

A low growl of irritation came from the House, shaking the windows. One or two slates slid from the roof and smashed on the ground below.

I'm going to have to be careful, Harvey thought; Hood's getting angry.

Rictus echoed that thought.

"I hope you're not stringing Mr. Hood along," he warned, "because he doesn't like that kind of game."

"He wants me happy, doesn't he?" Harvey said.

"Of course."

"So how about something to eat?"

"The kitchen's full," said Rictus.

"I don't want pies and hot dogs. I want " He paused, ransacking his memory for delicacies he'd heard about. "Roast swan and oysters and those little black eggs-"

"Caviar?" Rictus suggested.

"That's it! I want caviar!"

"Really? It's disgusting."

"I still want it!" said Harvey. "And frog's legs and horseradish and pomegranates-"

The meals were already appearing in the hallway, plate upon steaming plate. The smells were tantalizing at first, but the more dishes Harvey added to the list the more sickly the mix became. He rapidly began to exhaust his menu of real meals, however, so instead of giving the House easy recipes like meatballs and pizzas, he started to invent dishes.

"I want crawfish cooked in cherry soda and horse steaks with jelly-bean sauce, and Boston Cream Cheese and pastrami soup-"

"Wait! Wait!" said Rictus. "You're going too fast."

But Harvey didn't stop.

"-and pumpernickel stew and snail fudge with pig's-foot clusters-"

"Wait!" the House howled.

This time, Harvey stopped.

In the heat of his invention he hadn't even looked to see if Hood was supplying him with these eatables, but now he saw all the dishes he'd demanded piled so high in the hallway that they were threatening to topple and float the ark on a noxious sea of sweetmeats and stews.

"I know what you're doing," said the Hood-House.

Uh-oh, Harvey thought; he's onto me.

He looked up from the feast at the door to the facade and saw that his plan to drain the House of its magic was indeed working. Many of the windows were now cracked or broken; the doors were peeling and hanging from their hinges; the porch boards were twisted and blighted.

"You're testing me, aren't you?" said Hood. His voice had never been melodious, but it was now uglier than ever: like the rumble of the Devil's belly. "Admit it, thief," he said.

Harvey took a deep breath, then said: "If I'm going to be your apprentice, I need to know how powerful you are."

"Are you satisfied?" the decaying House demanded.

"Almost," Harvey said.

"What more do you want?" it roared.

What more indeed, Harvey thought. His mind was reeling with these ridiculous lists; he had little left in the way of demands.

"You may have one final gift," the Hood-House said, "one final proof of my power. Then you must accept me as your Master forever and ever. Agreed?"

Harvey felt a trickle of cold sweat run down his spine. He stared at the teetering House, his mind racing. What was left to demand?

"Agreed?" the House boomed.

"Agreed," he said.

"So tell me," it went on. "What do you want?"

He looked at the tiny animals around the ark, and at the flowers, and at the food spewing through the door. What should he demand? One final request, to break Hood's back. But what? What?

A gust of chilly wind came from the direction of the lake. Autumn could not be far off: The season of dying things.

"I know!" he said suddenly.

"Tell me," the House replied, "tell me and let's have this game over owe and fur all. I want your bright soul under my wing, little thief."

"And I want the seasons," Harvey said. "All the seasons at once."

"At once?"

"Yes, at once!"

"That's nonsensical!"

"It's what I want."

"Stupid! Imbecilic!"

"It's what I want! You said one more wish and that's it!"

"Very well," said the House. "I will give it to you. And when you have it, little thief, your soul is mine!"